

THE RIGHT OF REPLY

Eight or nine wise words about documentary-making...



Edward Wakeling exposes the factual errors, false premises and inaccurate conclusions contained in *The Secret World of Lewis Carroll*

When I, and a number of other Carrollian experts, agreed to take part in a BBC2 documentary entitled *The Secret World of Lewis Carroll*, we believed it was a programme celebrating the 150th anniversary of the first publication of the immortal favourite among children's stories, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. How wrong we were – for the programme-makers had a very

different agenda that they kept hidden from us – and with good reason.

Later they pretended their scurrilous agenda was set after we were interviewed by the presenter Martha Kearney in July/August 2014 – but this was not true. I happened to be at Christ Church when they recorded an interview with their consultant, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, in the Upper Library in late July 2014. But it was not until the programme aired that I discovered that the main topic of conversation between Kearney and Douglas-Fairhurst was based on a very biased view of Dodgson's photography, concentrating on only 1% of his photographic output – the nude studies – not mentioning his main work as a photographer. These nude pictures were a clue, they implied, to Dodgson's dark secret – of which more later.

A few weeks previously, I spent over four hours with the director of the programme, Clare Beavan, answering her questions and discussing the outline of the programme. When she told me she was very interested in the myths and speculations about Dodgson's character, I should have smelt a rat – but, unfortunately, I did not.

When it came to my interview, filmed at my home on 18 August 2014, once again the questions focussed on these speculations. I gave robust answers to all the questions suggesting that Dodgson's relationships with children were unhealthy. I dismissed the supposed rift with the Liddells as false and based on a line of biographers being economical with the truth. I clarified the position about the missing pages cut from Dodgson's diary, and so on. This non-stop interview with Kearney lasted two and a half hours. Now I realise that I was wasting my time because, as my answers countered the

points they had already decided that they wanted to make, most of what I said was left 'on the cutting-room floor' – only carefully selected snippets of this interview remained in the finished programme.

I had particularly asked not to be portrayed as contradicting Morton Cohen (although we do not see eye to eye on some Carrollian matters, I acknowledge that he has done a great deal for Carrollian scholarship) but this is exactly what the programme-makers did and a comment by me about the relationship between Dodgson and Alice Liddell, was immediately contradicted by a statement by Morton.

If you watched this programme, you will have noticed that the interviews with the contributors were cut up into small sound-bites – this was in order to add weight to the programme-makers' false view of Dodgson. He was portrayed as an oddball recluse living a cloistered life at Christ Church, which is far from the truth.

It begins with a pleasant, if slightly egotistical, section in which Martha Kearney recalls playing Alice in a village-hall production of *Through the Looking-Glass* in 1959. She appears to love both the *Alice* books and appreciates the fun and enjoyment she gained from them as a young girl. She goes on to explore the origin of the story told to the three Liddell sisters on a boat-trip to Godstow. As we all know Dodgson's tale became the story we know and love today, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published by Macmillan and Company in 1865.

The programme then shifts to Dodgson as a pioneer photographer, it is here that its bias begins to appear. As I have already mentioned, instead of telling us about 99% of his photographs of portraits, country scenes, Victorian celebrities, family groups, and still-life images, it concentrates solely on the nude studies. Kearney and Douglas-Fairhurst look closely at four images of little girls and seem to be disturbed and offended by them. All the children are aged eight or younger.

Neither Kearney and Douglas-Fairhurst mention the time and context in which these photographs were taken – a time when parents (all of whom had given permission for these photographs to be taken) viewed children as close to angels. These were images that their parents would proudly display on their mantelpieces at home. Many other Victorian photographers, such as Julia Margaret Cameron, Henry Peach Robinson, Lady Clementina Hawarden, and Oscar Rejlander, all made similar images of nude children. E Gertrude Thomson produced greeting cards that depicted similar cherubic images. In the 19th century this was perfectly acceptable, as long as the result was artistic and tasteful.

The presenter then claims to have found a previously unknown photograph taken by Dodgson. The image (which has no artistic merit at all) shows a

naked teenaged girl, full frontal, standing in an awkward pose and looking very ill at ease.

This photograph was not new to me. Many years ago, I worked with Maggie Gilchrist, Director of the Musée de Marseille, on an exhibition entitled *Poésure et Peintrie*. Following the exhibition, which opened in 1993, Maggie asked for my view on a photograph that had been donated to their collection a few years previously. This was the so-called 'unknown photograph taken by Dodgson' that Swan Films claimed they had discovered. On the back of the photograph is an inscription that reads: 'Lorina Liddell/L. Carroll/Col. M. C.' It is in an unknown hand – so it could have been written by anybody – perhaps even a crooked dealer hoping to get a premium price for a pornographic image. There was no provenance with the photograph apart from the fact that Parisian collectors owned it in the 1970s. They left it to the Musée de Marseille in their will in 1986. There was no link to Dodgson, and no link to the Liddell family.

I have spent many decades researching Dodgson's photographs and am probably one of the few people to have seen his entire surviving opus. Later this year I shall be publishing *The Photographs of Lewis Carroll, A Catalogue Raisonné* (The University of Texas Press, August 2015). The people making this documentary knew this and that I could authenticate (or not) their 'new' discovery – but they chose to keep it from me. They dare not show me the image as they anticipated my response – and it was not what they wanted to hear.

Back in 1993, Maggie Gilchrist wanted to check the authenticity of the photograph, and asked me for my views. I sent her a preliminary report that read:

'It certainly doesn't look like any other photograph he took. Four nude studies have survived [now six], but they are much more discreet than this one. A full frontal study is not really his style, particularly a girl as mature as this. He said that girls who went beyond the pre-pubescent stage did not interest him, although his interest modified as he got older. His photographs usually contain a catalogue [registration] number which is visible on the negative. Unless this picture has been cropped, it is certainly not one of his. His usual practice was to add the number on the back of any prints which he had developed.'

The photograph had clearly been trimmed and was mounted on a piece of coarse card (very unusual for Dodgson as he used specially prepared cabinet cards). There were no numbers on the verso as far as could be seen, and no inscription in his hand. The print size was also uncharacteristic – he had fixed plate sizes and then used templates in a particular style for trimming. This was not an artistic photograph of the kind taken by Dodgson. It was a record of a naked mature girl looking very

uncomfortable. Dodgson would never jeopardise the self-esteem of a child. All his nude studies were taken with the permission of the parents as indicated by surviving letters, and in some cases the parents initiated the nude study, and Dodgson obliged. There is no way that the Liddells would have allowed a picture of this kind to have been taken.

The conclusion that I came to was that the photograph was *not* by Dodgson, and it was *not* a photograph of Lorina Liddell. This latter point was inconceivable based on my work in editing Dodgson's diaries, and knowing his relationship with the Liddell family – a good relationship that lasted for the whole of Dodgson's life. The supposed 'rift' is yet another myth – the evidence proves otherwise. Since 1993, my view of this photograph has not changed, in fact, it has been strengthened on the basis of seeing almost 1,000 of his photographs.

So the BBC programme was completed, and I was given no opportunity to comment on this supposed newly discovered photograph by Dodgson. I tried very hard to get a scan of the photograph from Swan Films as soon as I heard about it, but my request was refused. I did not view the film until a week before transmission and, then, when I finally saw the photograph, I recognised it at once, and knew that it was *not* a Dodgson image.

The presenter brought in two 'supposed' experts to verify the photograph, neither were experts in Dodgson's work. The first, who was taken by Swan Films to Marseille, with Martha Kearney, to inspect the image, was a paper conservator from the Imperial War Museum. He indicated that the photograph could have been taken by an Ottewill folding camera (as used by Dodgson), and that it was made using the wet collodion process (used by Dodgson), and printed on albumen paper (also used by Dodgson). His logical deduction was that Dodgson took the photograph! What he failed to mention was that there were many thousands of photographers using the wet collodion process during the 1850s and 1860s, and most of them printed on albumen paper. This photograph could have been taken by anyone. When pushed by Kearney to say why he had come to his conclusion, he stated that 'everything about it' said it was taken by Dodgson. There was absolutely no credibility in what this man said. Even Kearney afterwards indicated that proof was still not confirmed, but it certainly clouded the view of the audience merely by suggestion and speculation.

The second man consulted was a forensic facial recognition specialist who compared three grainy photographs showing part of a face. Two were photographs of Lorina Liddell taken by Dodgson – one taken when Lorina was aged 20. (Would Dodgson have been allowed to take this photograph if he had previously been discovered taking a nude picture of her against her parents' wishes?) The man came to the conclusion that in a court of

law he could only say the image was moderately similar to the photographs of Lorina. Then Kearney pushed him to say more and eventually he said that since this is not a court of law he would come off the fence and say it was Lorina. This is very unconvincing and not scientific. (It was interesting to hear on the national news recently that forensic facial recognition has been criticised for being flawed and unreliable, and that there are government plans to regulate it).

Now we come to the statement by that well-known expert on everything, Will Self. (I can only describe him as a refuse lorry at a landfill site – he opens and his mouth and we all know what comes out.) In the programme he categorically states that Lewis Carroll is 'a severely repressed paedophile'. What does that mean? Is it like a severely repressed bibliophile – a person who wants to collect books, but is unable to do so?

There were a number of factual errors in the film, showing just how useful the programme's consultant was to the programme. I sent a list of 10 errors to the producer soon after I saw the preview, and two days before transmission, I am pleased to say that two were corrected and one was edited out. The other seven remained. No, Dodgson did not have two brothers. No, he did not suffer from OCD.

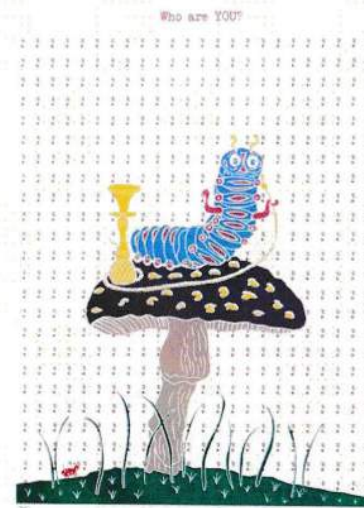
A statement was also added saying that I did not authenticate the photograph; as a result, several people wrote to me asking why did I not explain my reasons for this. The answer I gave them was that I had not been given the opportunity to explain. If I had, the last 20 minutes of the programme would have exposed it for what it was – a sham, based on no evidence at all.

The Secret World of Lewis Carroll was an exercise in deceit on several levels and it betrayed many of the contributors who took part. I, for one, would never have agreed to be in such a programme if I had known in advance the crooked line it was going to take.

We, Carrollians, now have the task of restoring Dodgson's damaged reputation following a BBC programme that was unkind, unfair and untruthful. I have chosen not to go to the Press, although I have had several opportunities to do so, and several people have asked me to do just that. But I thought that members of the Lewis Carroll Society would want to read this explanation of how those of us who took part were duped. I do not want to create a media furore – it serves no purpose. I just want this terrible, inaccurate programme to sink into oblivion as soon as possible.

• *The Secret World of Lewis Carroll* (made by Swan Films, was presented by Martha Kearney, directed by Clare Beavan, produced by Neil Crombie, with executive producer and link with the BBC, Greg Sanderson) was shown on Saturday 31 January 2015.

SCREEN-SCENE



Liz Whiteman Smith is a painter and printmaker who has lived and worked in many countries around the world and is currently based in London. She has been inspired by her travels and is drawn to the quirky and the unusual in the world around her. Her screen prints have an element of humour about them and display remarkable colours. Liz is currently working with a group of artists who are putting on an exhibition in celebration of 150th anniversary of the publication of *Alice*, at Espacio Gallery, 159 Bethnal Green Road, London, E2 7DG from 2 to 14 June 2015.



Artists in Wonderland will feature Liz's 12 *Alice* screen prints, of which nine have been printed so far. These are labour intensive works, beautifully produced with great technical proficiency. Images can be seen on her website but the prints have to be seen to appreciate how wonderful they really are.

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